



# Ancient *The American Discovery of* Egypt

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART NOVEMBER 5, 1995–JANUARY 21, 1996







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he allure of Ancient Egypt has engaged the American imagination since the late eighteenth century. This interest was stimulated by the mummies and artifacts brought back to America by travelers and New England seafarers. By 1830 more than thirty travel guides to Egypt had been published in the United States.

Egyptian artifacts began to enter American museums during this period, some through donation, others through purchase. John Lowell Jr. (1799–1836), a native of Massachusetts who visited Egypt in 1834, acquired a significant group of antiquities there, which ultimately became a cornerstone of the Egyptian collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Henry Abbott (1812–59), a British ship's surgeon who amassed an extensive collection while working in Cairo, hoped to profit by exhibiting it in the United States. When a display of more than eleven hundred of his pieces failed to realize a profit, the objects reverted to his creditors. They were purchased for the New-York Historical Society and later transferred to the Brooklyn Museum.

Nineteenth-century Americans' views of ancient Egypt were shaped by several interconnected ideas and beliefs. Despite the existence of travel guides and other books on the subject, ancient Egypt was known to

Americans primarily through the Bible. Though the Bible occasionally portrayed Egypt in a positive light, the image it presented, typified by the story of Exodus, was overwhelmingly negative. Biblical Egypt was a land of tyranny, slavery, and oppression. Yet there were also positive stereotypes that offset the negative ones. Egypt was seen as a source of secret wisdom, and in the early American republic the ancient Egyptians were especially admired for their skill as builders.

Americans' stereotypical notions of ancient Egypt were gradually supplanted by more informed views. This process gained impetus in the late nineteenth century, when Americans began to pursue Egyptology on a more scholarly level. At this time Americans who wished to receive formal instruction in

Egyptology still had to travel to Europe. Charles Edwin Wilbour (1833–96), for example, a former journalist and businessman, studied in Berlin and in France. Wilbour traveled to Egypt regularly to copy inscriptions, record his observations, and collect artifacts (see no. 10, *left*), which his descendants ultimately donated to the Brooklyn Museum.

The founding in England in 1882 of the Egypt Exploration Fund (or EEF, known today as the Egypt Exploration Society), an organization that sponsored excavations in Egypt, encouraged the development of museum collections in the United States. American institutions that subscribed to



**The "Wilbour Plaque"**  
Amarna(?), 18th Dynasty, reign  
of Akhenaten (c. 1353–1335 B.C.)  
or shortly thereafter; limestone,  
pigment; 15.7 x 22.1 x 4.2 cm  
(6 1/8 x 8 3/4 x 1 5/8 in.); The Brooklyn  
Museum, gift of the estate of  
Charles Edwin Wilbour, 16.48





The Metropolitan Museum of Art's excavation of the temple of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep, Deir el Bahri, 1922

the EEF were given a share of its finds. Around the turn of the twentieth century American museums and universities began to fund their own fieldwork in Egypt.

The first professionally trained American Egyptologists were latecomers, arriving in Egypt decades after their European counterparts. Within a short time, however, they had had a dramatic impact on the discipline, revolutionizing archaeological field techniques and reshaping our knowledge of Egyptian civilization. The outstanding representatives of this generation were George Andrew Reisner (1867–1942) and James Henry Breasted (1865–1935). Beginning in 1899 Reisner led excavations for the University of California, Berkeley, and later, after 1905, for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University. He brought a new level of professionalism to archaeological fieldwork, promoting the careful documentation of finds, the production of detailed site plans, attention to geology, and extensive field photography. Reisner is especially noted for his work on the Giza Plateau and in Nubia (present-day Sudan).



James Henry Breasted at his desk in the Haskell Museum, University of Chicago

In 1895 Breasted was appointed assistant professor of Egyptology at the University of Chicago, holding the first teaching position in the field at an American university. He had a special concern with the documentation and preservation of Egypt's standing monuments, which are far more vulnerable to plundering and environmental destruction than its buried antiquities. In 1924 he founded the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago, which has set an international standard for the recording of ancient Egyptian inscriptions, reliefs, and wall paintings.

Many Americans associate fieldwork in Egypt with the spectacular 1922 discovery of the intact tomb of Tutankhamun by British excavators Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, yet American explorations in Egypt, "taken together, were more elaborate in their equipment, more ambitious in their objectives, and more generously financed, than any archaeological expeditions sent by any country to any area."<sup>1</sup> *The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt* reveals the significant contributions made by American institutions to the study of ancient Egypt and the culturally related region of Nubia.

1 Sterling Dow, "The Founding of an American Research Center in Egypt," *Archaeology* 1 (1948): 10.





The Predynastic cultures of ancient Egypt (so called because they preceded the founding of a unified Egyptian state under a series of monarchs who are grouped into successive dynasties) were characterized by the establishment of permanent settlements, domestication of plants and animals, and the gradual transition from a fairly egalitarian society to a more hierarchical one. The inclusion of ceramic and stone vessels and personal and ceremonial objects in Predynastic burials indicates that ancient Egyptians had already developed the concept of an afterlife that in some ways mirrored their earthy existence.

Predynastic burials were simple graves that occasionally contained objects from daily life intended for use by the deceased. This palette (no. 17) was excavated by Albert M. Lythgoe, working under George A. Reisner, from a burial dated around 3900–3650 B.C. at Naga el-Deir. In 1901 the Egyptian Antiquities Service granted Reisner permission to conduct fieldwork at this site, which included burials from Predynastic times to the twentieth century. Until 1905 Reisner's work in Egypt was financed by Phoebe A. Hearst for the University of California, Berkeley.

The small scale, intricate inlay of ostrich-shell beads, and the perforation in the central section suggest that this palette may have been intended to be worn as a pendant. Larger palettes were used to grind pigments for the adornment of the face and body.

### *Double-Bird "Pelta" Palette*

Naga el-Deir, Predynastic  
(c. 3900–3650 B.C.)  
Siltstone, ostrich eggshell  
7.6 x 12.3 cm (3 x 4 7/8 in.)  
Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum  
of Anthropology, University of  
California, Berkeley, 6-4746



2649–2134 B.C.

## Old Kingdom

Around 3000 B.C. a series of energetic warrior kings consolidated their hold on Upper (southern) Egypt and extended their dominion into Lower (northern) Egypt, unifying the traditional “two lands” of Egypt and initiating the dynastic era. Egyptian civilization achieved greater sophistication during the Old Kingdom. Among the most striking architectural remains of the period are the Sphinx and the pyramids at Giza, near modern-day Cairo. The forms of artistic expression that arose during the Old Kingdom became the “classical” ideal that guided later phases of Egyptian cultural development.



Reisner's request for more professional fieldwork at Giza prompted the Egyptian Antiquities Service to allow German, Italian, and American institutions to draw lots for excavation rights to the area. He was assigned the northern strip of the Western Cemetery and the additional site of the pyramid and mortuary complex of King Menkaure (c. 2490–2472 B.C.).

This head of Menkaure (no. 39) was found by Reisner in one of the valley temples of the king's mortuary complex. It belonged to one of four statues that flanked the inner sanctum of the temple and was one of many spectacular finds made by Reisner at Giza.

Creating idealized stone sculptures of the king was a common practice during the Old Kingdom which continued throughout ancient Egyptian civilization. Symbols of Menkaure's sovereignty include the royal beard and the uraeus (sacred cobra) on the forehead. The head was reworked in ancient times, resulting in awkward proportions when viewed in profile and an unfinished hairstyle. These alterations may have coincided with changes in the design of the temple.

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## *Menkaure*

Giza, 4th Dynasty, reign of  
Menkaure (c. 2490–2472 B.C.)  
Calcite  
28.5 x 16 cm (11¼ x 6½ in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 09.203



Following the collapse of the Old Kingdom, the south was ruled by the Theban dynasty, while the north was controlled by kings from Herakleopolis, resulting in what is known as the First Intermediate Period.



This funerary stela (no. 49) was acquired for the University of California, Berkeley, by Reisner during his exploration of a private burial from the First Intermediate Period strata at Naga el-Deir. Beginning at Giza during the 4th Dynasty, private burials attempted on a modest scale to reflect royal tombs in their construction and content. Reisner's excavations at Naga el-Deir revealed that, with the loosening of administrative control at the end of the Old Kingdom, this practice had spread to provincial areas.

As was traditional for Egyptian stelae, inscriptions on this piece identify the deceased, Satnetinheret, the wife of a local official, giving her titles and instructions for offerings to be made in her honor. She stands beside depictions of offerings and holds a mirror, an unusual detail. Because of the mirror's ability to reproduce an image, it may have been associated with the belief in rebirth in the afterlife.

The classical artistic canons of the Old Kingdom were relaxed during the First Intermediate Period. This resulted in characteristics such as the bold color scheme of this stela and the irregularly spaced hieroglyphs and offerings.

### *Stela of Satnetinheret*

Naga el-Deir, 9th to early 11th  
Dynasties, c. 2134–2060 B.C.

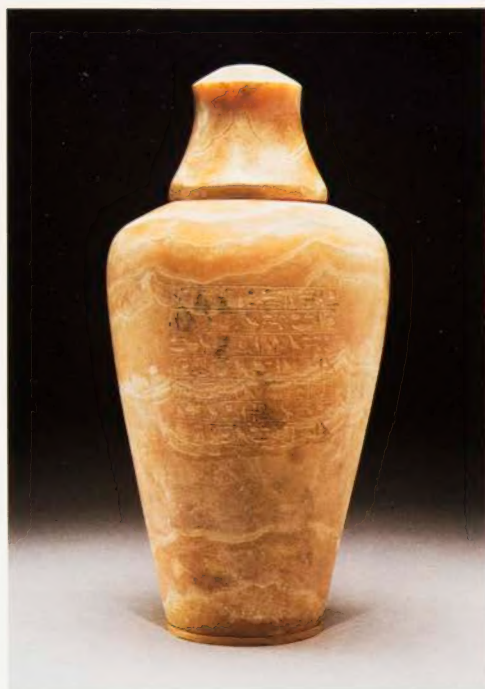
Limestone, pigment

66 x 40 x 11.5 cm

(26 x 15½ x 4½ in.)

Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum  
of Anthropology, University of  
California, Berkeley, 6-19881





Egypt was reunited by the Theban king Nebhepetre Mentuhotep, who left an impressive mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri. The period is noteworthy for its foreign relations and for Egyptian colonial expansion into Nubia. The Middle Kingdom was a high point for all of the arts. The form of the written language then in use remained the standard of literate expression for several succeeding centuries. Visual artists initially looked to Old Kingdom prototypes, but as the period advanced, they developed a distinctive style characterized by sophistication and technical refinement.

Although incorporated in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not establish a department of Egyptology or undertake fieldwork in Egypt until 1906. In 1895 the museum began to acquire Egyptian antiquities through subscription to the EEF. This water jar (no. 58) was excavated from a 12th Dynasty tomb in 1919–20 by W. M. Flinders Petrie, the EEF's leading archaeologist.

Many of the conventions of the Old Kingdom were revived during the Middle Kingdom, including vast royal mortuary complexes. The tomb of Princess Sithathoryunet, where this jar was found, was situated near the pyramid of her father, Senwosret II, the fourth ruler of the 12th Dynasty. By this period such jars were used only for ritual pouring of libations, yet this example recalls a functional type from the Old Kingdom.

The sole decoration of this monumental yet graceful jar is the inscription to Princess Sithathoryunet. Writing was invented in Egypt around 3000 B.C. and became an important element in Egyptian art; hieroglyphic inscriptions were incorporated into compositions for decorative as well as instructive purposes. The careful spacing and skillful carving of the hieroglyphs on this jar reveal the sophistication of funerary art during the Middle Kingdom.

## *Water Jar with Lid*

Lahun, 12th Dynasty, reign of  
Amenemhat III (c. 1844–1797 B.C.)  
Calcite  
55.8 x 26.7 (diam) cm  
(22 x 10½ in.)  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Rogers Fund, 1921, 21.2.62



1550–1070 B.C.

## New Kingdom

**At the beginning of the New Kingdom, Egypt was once again reunited after a period of division, inaugurating one of the most brilliant periods in Egyptian history, noted for its increasingly sophisticated art, architecture, and literature; its powerful monarchs; and its military campaigns, which extended Egyptian domination east to Mesopotamia and south into Nubia.**



Located in Upper (southern) Egypt, Thebes became the capital and administrative center during the early part of the 18th Dynasty (1550–1307 B.C.) of the New Kingdom. Kings were buried in lavish tombs in an area of western Thebes known as the Valley of the Kings, which continued to be used for royal burials even after the capital was moved to the north in the late 18th Dynasty.

In 1910 the Metropolitan Museum of Art was given excavation rights to several areas at Thebes, where its excavators spent the next twenty-seven years exploring royal and private tombs dating as early as the Old Kingdom. Working under Lythgoe, then director of the museum's expedition to Egypt, Herbert E. Winlock discovered this relief (no. 74) in the foundation of an unfinished New Kingdom temple of Ramesses IV in the Asasif, western Thebes.





Originally believed to have been created during the reign of Ramesses II (1290–1224 B.C.) and reused in the foundation of Ramesses IV's (1163–1156 B.C.) temple, this monumental battle relief is now attributed to the earlier reign of Amenhotep II (1427–1401 B.C.) based on the costumes, the absence of decorative streamers on the horses, and the stylistic treatment of the figures' facial features. The scene shows defeated Syrians, one of the many groups conquered by Egypt during the 18th Dynasty.

### *Tuthmoside Battle Relief*

Asasif, 18th Dynasty, reign of  
Tuthmosis III, Hatshepsut, or  
Amenhotep II (1479–1401 B.C.)  
Sandstone, pigment  
61 x 115 x 40 cm  
(24 x 45 x 15¾ in.)  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Rogers Fund, 1913, 13.180.21



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Economic decline and external pressures brought an end to the New Kingdom, initiating a period of disunity known as the Third Intermediate Period. Egypt succumbed to foreign invasions, being ruled first by Libya, then Nubia, and later by the powerful Assyrian military state.



### *Mirror of Shabako*

El-Kurru, 25th Dynasty,  
reign of Shabako (c. 712–698 B.C.)  
Bronze mirror, gilded silver handle

H: 32.9 cm (12 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.)

Handle: H: 14.3 cm (5 $\frac{5}{8}$  in.)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
21.318

The Nubian kings began their conquest of Egypt around 770 B.C., and by 712 B.C. they had conquered both Upper and Lower Egypt to rule Egypt and Nubia under the 25th Dynasty. The royal tombs of the Nubian kings of the 25th Dynasty are located at el-Kurru and Nuri in Nubia. Reisner excavated the burials of five of the Nubian kings at el-Kurru, in addition to numerous other Nubian sites, from 1906 to 1932, revealing a wealth of information about Nubian culture.

This mirror (no. 99) was discovered by Reisner in 1916 during his excavations of King Shabako's tomb (712–698 B.C.) for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University. Mirrors were part of the tomb furnishings of Nubian burials from as early as 2000 B.C. to as late as A.D. 350, suggesting that they were important religious symbols. Like the mirror represented on the stela of Satnetinheret (*page 6*), this example may have been symbolically linked to the concept of rebirth.

The iconography of the four figures carved in exquisite relief on the handle of the mirror is drawn from the Egyptian religious pantheon. Each figure depicts a manifestation of the goddess Hathor, the symbolic mother of the pharaoh.





After a brief period of native rule, Egypt was conquered first by the Persians in 343 B.C. and then by the armies of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. Ptolemy, a general in the Macedonian army, was sent to govern Egypt following Alexander's death in 323 B.C. In 304 B.C., in the wake of the disintegration of the Macedonian Empire, Ptolemy proclaimed himself king and established a dynastic rule that lasted until 30 B.C., when the Roman army defeated Antony and Cleopatra and Egypt became part of the Roman Empire.

This column drum (no. 111A) was discovered in 1923 by Dows Dunham, who worked with Reisner in Egypt from 1914 to 1928 and later, in 1942, succeeded him as curator of the Egyptian department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The drum was found, together with twenty-four blocks that were part of a gateway, during the excavation of Ptolemaic and Roman period ruins at Coptos in Upper Egypt. Both the column drum and the blocks were reused in the construction of a later structure.

The Ptolemaic and Roman rulers were careful to pay homage to Egyptian religious practices, including the building of temples dedicated to Egyptian gods and the creation of funerary art depicting traditional Egyptian subjects. This fragment shows Osiris, god of the dead, receiving offerings from the Roman emperor Augustus (30 B.C.–A.D. 14), depicted as an Egyptian king. The offering of gifts to the gods in return for blessings was a common subject in Egyptian mortuary art.

## Column Drum

Coptos, Roman period, reign of Augustus (30 B.C.–A.D. 14)  
Sandstone, pigment, gilding  
55 x 54 (diam) cm  
(21 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
24.1808



## **American Egyptological Projects, Mid-1960s to the Present**

This exhibition was co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the American Research Center in Egypt. Exclusive sponsorship for this exhibition has been provided through a generous grant from The May Department Stores Company and its Robinsons-May division. Additional funds were provided by Gily AG, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department. Education programs are funded in part by a grant from the California Arts Council.

*For information on related events, please pick up a flyer at the information desk in the Times Mirror Central Courtyard, or consult AT THE MUSEUM and local newspaper listings.*

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American work in Egypt continues. Many of the current projects reflect a new emphasis on the preservation and maintenance of ancient sites and the utilization of multidisciplinary archaeology. Projects such as the Nubian Salvage Campaign, initiated by a consortium of international institutions at the request of UNESCO and the Egyptian and Sudanese governments in 1959 in anticipation of flooding from the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Lower Nubia, have been concerned with the documentation and preservation of sites. Modern technology has enhanced the ability of researchers to more accurately reconstruct sites and analyze their cultures in endeavors such as the Giza Plateau Mapping Project, sponsored by the University of Chicago. Even spectacular discoveries such as the American University in Cairo's excavation of tomb KV5, the burial site of Ramesses II's sons, are viewed as a means of attaining a fuller understanding of ancient Egyptian civilization. Ultimately this has always been the goal of American archaeologists working in Egypt, and it remains the enduring contribution of America's first generation of Egyptologists.

**COVER** James Henry Breasted and team surveying the temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel during the University of Chicago's first epigraphic survey, 1905-6.

**INSIDE COVERS** Massive columns, Great Temple of Amun, Karnak







